



## “This Generation Shall Not Pass” (Matt 24:34): Failed Or Fulfilled Prophecy?<sup>1</sup>

Richard M. Davidson

**M**ATTHEW 24:34 IS ONE OF THOSE *CRUX*  
*interpretum* texts in the New Testament:<sup>2</sup> “Verily, I say

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<sup>1</sup>This study is dedicated to my beloved colleague, Norman Gulley, in hopes that it may contribute a small footnote to his magnificent *magnum opus* on eschatology, *Christ is Coming!*

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Fitzmyer called the reference to “this generation” in this verse (and synoptic parallels) “in the long run the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse;” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 1353.

Since “this generation,” the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the world are mentioned in the same passage, and the generation of Jesus’ disciples obviously did not experience both the fall of the city and the end of the world, critical scholars assume that the synoptics contain an erroneous, unfulfilled prophecy. The history of critical scholarship is primarily a debate over whether the blame for this “mistake” should be put on Jesus (the sayings are considered authentic) or on the gospel writers (the sayings are attributed to Jesus but are not His). See the review of scholarship of Jesus’ eschatological discourse in George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

Modern evangelicals often acknowledge the puzzle without trying to either solve it or decide whether Jesus or the Gospel writer is to blame; e.g., Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 281: “Verse 34 solemnly promises that Jesus will return while some of his contemporaries are still alive... [T]his prediction was not fulfilled.” Other evangelicals treat the text as describing one event throughout the discourse (Fall of Jerusalem), but that the prophecy has a double fulfillment (Parousia); e.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*,

unto you, 'This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.'"<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis called this passage "the most embarrassing verse in the Bible."<sup>4</sup>

This verse has been frequently cited by Jews, Muslims, and agnostics as one of the main arguments in the case against Christ, Christianity, and the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> If Jesus predicted that He would come again in His generation, as many have interpreted Matthew 24:34 to teach, then His prediction clearly failed, and (so goes the argument) the veracity of His messianic claims, of Christianity in general, and of the New Testament Scriptures, is called into question. Did Jesus

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2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 490-491. It is not uncommon to assign "this generation" to the disciples and the Fall of Jerusalem without explaining how verse 34 fits into the larger discourse; e.g., Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1995), 715. Another interpretation is to take the phrase "this generation" as referring to the Jewish race; e.g., William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 867-869. A related interpretation is that "this generation" refers qualitatively to "this kind of people;" this is entertained by, e.g., Hendrickson, 868; Gundry, 491; and Richard C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1953), 952. Still other interpreters take the phrase "this generation" in Matt 24:34 as referring to "the people living at the end time who will see those signs;" John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 64. Cf. S. Joseph Kidder, "'This Generation' in Matthew 24:34," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 21(1983): 207; and John Francie Hart, "A Chronology of Matthew 24:1-44," Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986, 218-219. For further survey of these and other interpretations (and proponents) for this verse, see Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 876-877; and Hart, 211-219.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

<sup>4</sup>C. S. Lewis, "The World's Last Night," in *The Essential C. S. Lewis*, Lyle W. Dorsett, ed. (New York: Touchstone, Simon and Schuster, 1996), 385.

<sup>5</sup>See the documentation for this in John Noë, "The Only Defense in the Major Case against Christ, Christianity, and the Bible," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Toronto, Canada, November 2002, 3-12.

mistakenly predict that He would come again the second time in His first-century generation? Or is it the interpreters of this passage who have failed to understand its meaning?

Matthew 24:34 is also a crucial passage for Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) interpreters. The *SDA Bible Commentary* points out that "the words 'this generation' in v. 34 are in the context of vs. 27-51, which deal exclusively with the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the world."<sup>6</sup> Thus, this commentary argues, "The signs mentioned in these verses and in Luke – 'signs' in the heavens and 'upon the earth' (Luke 21:25) – would take place so near the day of His coming that Christ declared that the 'generation' that sees the last of the signs, shall not pass before 'all these things [Christ's coming and the end of the world] be fulfilled.'"<sup>7</sup> Such argumentation is still common in many SDA circles.

Working from a historicist understanding of this prophecy, Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally interpreted the signs mentioned in Matthew 24:29 – the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars in particular – as having been historically fulfilled in the Dark Day of May 19, 1780 and the great Leonid meteorite shower of November 13, 1833, coming around the end of the 1260 days (i.e., literal years) of "great tribulation" (Dan 7:25; Matt 24:21) which terminated in 1798.<sup>8</sup> If one accepts the Adventist identification of the historical fulfillment of the signs as correct,<sup>9</sup> then what does one do

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<sup>6</sup>Francis D. Nichol, ed. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1956), 4:503.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. This interpretation also has proponents in the wider evangelical community (see footnote 2 above).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 4:501-502.

<sup>9</sup>See my brief defense of the correctness of these fulfillments in the context of Adventist eschatology, in "The Second Advent and the 'Fullness of Time,'" *Ministry*, June-July 2000, 41-47.

with Jesus' prediction that "this generation [which saw the signs] shall not pass, until all these things be fulfilled"?

Early Adventist interpreters utilized this passage as a promise that Christ would surely come within the lifetime of those who witnessed the cosmic signs connected with the Great Second Advent Awakening of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The passing of time, and the death of the eyewitnesses of these signs, brought disillusionment to many in the SDA movement. Their question is still ours today: Has the prophecy of Matthew 24:34 failed, or has it already been fulfilled? A closer look at the structure and key terminology of Matthew 24 provides an answer to these questions and a coherent picture of Jesus' discourse in this chapter.<sup>10</sup>

### The Key To Interpreting Matthew 24: Verses 1-3

The key to unlocking the meaning of Matthew 24:34, and of the whole chapter, is located in the terminological pattern already set in the historical context of vss. 1-3. In vs. 1 the disciples pointed out to Jesus the magnificent buildings of the Jerusalem temple, and in vs. 2, Jesus responds, "Do you not see all these things?" Here the Greek word *tauta*, translated as "these things," clearly refers to the Jerusalem temple. Then in vs. 3, as Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives overlooking the temple, the disciples came to Him privately, and asked, "Tell us, when will these things [*tauta*] be? And what will be the sign of your coming [*parousia*] and of the end [*synteleia*] of the age?" Note that the disciples ask two basic questions – one regarding the *tauta* "these things" – which from the previous context refer clearly to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the second regarding the sign of the Parousia (Christ's Second Coming)

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<sup>10</sup>The overall structure of Jesus' discourse in this essay can be seen in all three synoptic gospels, but is clearest and most precise in the Gospel of Matthew.

and of the *synteleia* "end" of the world/age.<sup>11</sup> The disciples probably did not distinguish between these two events in their minds, but it is evident that Jesus draws a careful distinction in His Olivet discourse, based upon the very terminology that He and the disciples had used. The term *tauta* "these things" consistently refers to events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem (we may label this "A"), and the terms *parousia* "coming" and *synteleia* "end" refer to events connected with the Second Advent of Christ (we may label this "B"). This is summarized in the following chart:

Key To Interpreting Matthew 24: The Pattern Of Terms In Vss. 1-3	
A. The Fall Of Jerusalem	B. The End Of The World
Vs. 2 – <i>tauta</i> "these things"	Vs. 3 – <i>parousia</i> "coming"
Vs. 3 – <i>tauta</i> "these things"	Vs. 3 – <i>synteleia</i> "end"

Let us see how this works itself out in the structure and flow of Matthew 24:4-44. In the discussion that follows, it will be argued that the remainder of Matthew 24 (through vs. 44) consists of an ABA'B' pattern, building upon the distinctions of vss. 2-3, where A/A' stands for events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, and B/B' stands for events after the destruction of Jerusalem leading up to the Second Advent of Christ. We move now to a discussion of this structural flow of the chapter.

<sup>11</sup>A number of Matthew scholars point out this two-fold question of the disciples that Jesus proceeds to answer in His discourse. See, e.g., Bruner, 844: "Matthew's *two* distinct questions – 'When is this Jerusalem disaster?' and 'What is the sign of your End-coming?' – teach us to read every answer in Jesus' sermon in a shimmering, two-colored way as Jesus answers *both* to prototype (Jerusalem) *and* to reality (End-coming);" (Italics original).

### The Structural Flow Of Matthew 24:4-44

#### A. Verses 4-20: Events Up To, And Including The Fall Of Jerusalem

Matthew 24:4-7 lists a number of signs which Christ outlines to His disciples: false Christs (vs. 5), wars and rumors of wars (vs. 6), nation/kingdom against nation/kingdom, famines, pestilences, widespread earthquakes (vs. 7). Now note vs. 8: "All these things [*tauta*] are the beginning of sorrows." The same term *tauta* "these things" appears here as in vss. 2-3. In Greek, as in English, the word *touto* "this" (singular) or *tauta* "these" (plural) points to things that are up close, nearby, whereas the word *ekeinos* "that" (singular) or *ekeinoi* "those" (plural) refers to something farther away, more distant. Jesus utilizes this distinction between "this/these" and "that/those" to indicate the focus of His discussion. By utilizing *tauta* "these" in vs. 8, He is remaining consistent with the prior usage of the term in vss. 2-3, and pointing to the signs up close, nearby – the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Within this context of the destruction of Jerusalem, it is also important to recognize that the term "end" in vs. 6 ("but the end is not yet") has reference (at least in its primary application) to the end of the Jewish nation in the destruction of Jerusalem, not the end of the age with the Second Advent. Note that the term for "end" used here in vs. 6 is not *synteleia*, the word employed in vs. 3 to refer to the end of the world/age, but *telos*. Elsewhere in Matthew, the word *telos* "end" is never used with reference to the end of the age (see Matt 10:22; 26:58);<sup>12</sup> rather the term for the "end" with reference to the "end of the age" (Second Advent of Christ) is always *synteleia* (see Matt 13:39, 40, 49;

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<sup>12</sup>In Matt 26:58 *telos* is clearly referring to the end or "outcome" of Jesus' trial. Matt 10:22 is given in the context of sending out the Twelve for evangelistic ministry in Israel, and in this passage *eis telos* (without the article) appears "to signify the end of the trials in question;" Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 256.

28:20). Jesus continues His list of signs in vss. 9-12 (tribulation and persecution, false prophets, lawlessness, love growing cold), and then again mentions the *telos* "end" in vs. 13: "But he who endures to the end [*telos*] shall be saved." In line with what we have just noted above, the word *telos* "end" here (not *synteleia*) also should be seen (at least in its primary application) to refer specifically to the end of Jerusalem with its destruction, not to the end of the world/age.

Such is also the case in vs. 14: "And this [*touto*] gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end [*telos*] will come." In this verse we have two terminological indicators as to the primary referent of the verse. First, the term *touto* "this" is the singular counterpart of *tauta* "these," which we have noted above is used to refer to events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem. Second, the term for "end" is *telos*, not *synteleia*, and thus consistent with usage in the rest of the chapter and the book, does not refer (at least in its primary application) to the end of the world/age, but to the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Contra Bruner (representative of many other interpreters), who inexplicably misses the consistent distinction of terms for the "end" elsewhere in Matthew and states that *telos* in its four occurrences in Matt 24:3, 6, 13-14, refers directly to the end of the age: "This fourfold witness means that our minisermion is especially about *the end of the world*, the *telos*, and not just about the destruction of the temple;" (847, italics original). There are some commentators, however, who recognize that Matt 24:14 may be seen to be fulfilled before 70 AD as the gospel of the kingdom was proclaimed among the nations at least in a representative sense (Rom 10:18; Col 1:6). See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 356-357. Blomberg (356) also gives historical evidence that the various other events of Matt 24:5-14 occurred between AD 30 and AD 70; see also, William G. Thompson, "An Historical Perspective in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 243-262; and Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 569-570.

Note that Ellen White clearly recognized that the setting of the destruction of Jerusalem is the primary application/interpretation of these passages in Matt 24 employing *telos*. She cites Matthew 24:6 with her interpretation in brackets: "All these things must come to pass," said Christ, "but the end [of the Jewish nation as a nation]

Verses 15-20 now move to a description of the events immediately before the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus warns (vss. 15-16), "Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." The Lukan parallel to these verses paraphrases and interprets the meaning of this statement for a Gentile audience, making clear that Jesus' reference is to the events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains" (Luke 21:20-21). Luke also utilizes the term *tauta* "these" to depict the events of the destruction of Jerusalem: "For these [*autai*] are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Luke 21:22).

Both Matthew and Luke also use the phrase "in those days" [*en ekainais tais hēmerais*] in recording Christ's warning about the distressful times in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem: "But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days [*en ekainais tais hēmerais*]" (Matt 24:19; Luke 21:23). The single use of "those days" along with the more usual "these"/"this"/"these days" in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem seems to be a recognition that the woe to the pregnant and nursing women is in fact a ways off in

is not yet," Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 628. White also recognizes the primary application of vss. 12-14 to the first century, with a secondary fulfillment in the last days of earth's history. She introduces her quotation of these verses with a clear identification of the primary application of the verses: "In the *prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction*, Christ said...[Matt 24:12-14 cited];" (emphasis added). Then she remarks: "This prophecy will again be fulfilled. The abounding iniquity of that day finds its counterpart in this generation. So with the prediction in regard to the preaching of the gospel. Before the fall of Jerusalem, Paul, writing by the Holy Spirit, declared that the gospel was preached to 'every creature which is under heaven.' Col. 1:23. So now, before the coming of the Son of man, the everlasting gospel is to be preached 'to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.' Rev. 14:6, 14;" (633).



the future (almost forty years, as it turned out), enough to be described as "those days" as well as "these [days]." It may also serve as a transition to the next literary section of the chapter.

The key terms and their referents in the above discussion are summarized in the following chart:

A. Verses 4-20: Events Up To, And Including The Fall Of Jerusalem	
Vss.	Significant Terms And Explanation
8	<i>tauta</i> "these things" = events leading up to destruction of Jerusalem
6	<i>telos</i> "end" (not <i>synteleia</i> "end") = end of Jerusalem and Jewish nation
13	<i>telos</i> "end" (not <i>synteleia</i> "end") = end of Jerusalem and Jewish nation
14	<i>touto</i> "this" (like "these") = related to destruction of Jerusalem
14	<i>telos</i> "end" (not <i>synteleia</i> "end") = end of Jerusalem and Jewish nation
15-16	"abomination of desolation" = Roman armies (cf. Luke 21:20-21)
19	<i>en ekainais tais hēmerais</i> "in those days" (demonstrative adjective <i>before</i> its noun) = destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Luke 21:23)

## B. Verses 21-31: Events Up To, And Including The Second Advent

Matthew 24:21-31 now move away from the description of the destruction of Jerusalem and refer to events leading up to, and including, the Parousia of Jesus and the end of the world/age. Verse 21 foretells "a great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now,<sup>14</sup> no, nor ever shall be." Note that this text

<sup>14</sup>Both the KJV and NKJV read "until this time," but the word "this" [*touto*] is not present in the text. Rather it is the term *ton nun* "now," as rendered by most other modern versions (e.g., NASB, NRSV, NIV). Thus the chapter does not break the consistency of using *touto* "this" or *tauta* "these" for events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, not for events leading up to the Parousia.

describes “a great tribulation” (without the article), and thus most probably does not refer to “the great tribulation” of Revelation 7:14 (where the article “the” appears) at the very end of time.

Nor is there reference here to the tribulation connected with the destruction of Jerusalem. Verse 22 speaks of the time of great tribulation mentioned in the previous verse as *hai hēmerai ekeinai* “those days:” “And unless those days [*hai hēmerai ekeinai*] were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days [*hai hēmerai ekeinai*] will be shortened.” While both vs. 22 and vs. 19 use the term “those days,” there is a significant difference in the Greek word order. The “those days” of vs. 19 (which refer to the destruction of Jerusalem) are unique in placing the adjective “those” before the noun “days”: *en ekainais tais hēmerais*. By contrast, the “those days” of vs. 22 (as well as vs. 29, to be examined below), has the adjective “those” after the noun “days”: *hai hēmerai ekeinai* (literally “days-those”). According to Greek grammarian C. F. D. Moule, such change in position of the demonstrative adjective in relation to its noun may be significant especially in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>15</sup> This factor is extremely significant in Matthew 24. When referring to “those days” connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew employs one word order, but for the “those days” of vss. 22 and 29 he reverses the word order. There seems to be an intentional shift in word order to indicate a different period of tribulation than that connected with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The parallel passage in Luke helps us to identify this period of great tribulation. As we have already noted, Luke 21:23 uses the same

<sup>15</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: University Press, 1952), 122: “Note that the position of *houtos* (when used attributively) in relation to its noun is a delicate, and, it may be, significant matter. In St Matthew, St Mark, St Luke, the Acts, and St John, it occurs *after* more frequently than *before*. Possibly the comparatively few occurrences before may indicate some special intention.” While his comments are specifically relating to *houtos* “this,” they come in the immediate context of a discussion of *ekeinos/ekeinoi* “that/those” and probably apply to both demonstrative adjectives.

phrase *en ekainais tais hēmerais* “in those days” in the same Greek word order as in Matthew to describe the time at the destruction of Jerusalem. Then in the next verse, 24a, Luke records Jesus’ prediction that at the time of Jerusalem’s destruction “many will fall by the sword, and be led away captive into all nations.” While this verse is another *crux interpretum* passage, and the subject for another separate study, in brief, it appears that after the depiction of the destruction of the city, the dispersion of the Jews into all the nations widens the scope of the prophecy to universal dimensions. In vs. 24b, the term “Jerusalem” becomes universalized to include all God’s covenant people: “Jerusalem [God’s people] will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

The universalizing of Luke 21:24b is indicated not only by the immediate context but also by several intertextual linkages. Looking backward in the canon, Luke 21:24 clearly alludes to Daniel 7 and 8. The term *patoumenē* “trampled” in Luke 21:24 is from the same verbal root (*kata-*)*pateō* as in Daniel 8:10 (LXX) for the “trampling” *katapatēthē* of God’s people (the “host”) by the little horn power. Further, the term *kairoi* “times” of Luke 21:24 is precisely the same term as found in Daniel 7:25 (LXX), where the saints are given into the hand of the little horn “for a time [*kairos*], and times [*kairoi*] and half a time [*kairos*].” Thus Luke 21:24 brings together the prophecies of Daniel 7 and 8 concerning the time of the dominion of the little horn power over the saints, and by the intertextual linkage shows that these are equivalent to the “trampling” of Jerusalem and the “times” of the Gentiles.

Looking forward in the canon, the intertextual linkage with Revelation 11:2 confirms this identification. Revelation 11:2 refers to the Gentiles who “will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months.” This latter passage unites Daniel 7:25, Daniel 8:10, 13, and Luke 21:24 with its reference to the time prophecy of 42 months (= 3½ *kairoi* “times”), the trampling (of the holy city (= Jerusalem = the saints) by the Gentiles (= the little horn).

Thus from the parallel passage in Luke 21:24, we can conclude that the “those days” of Matthew 24:21 refers to the 1260 days (i.e., literal years) of dominion of the little horn power, which historicists, since the magisterial Reformers, have generally interpreted as the time of papal supremacy, and which Seventh-day Adventists have specifically dated from AD 538 to 1798.

Moving onward in the flow of the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, Jesus predicts general signs that will appear in the interval before He comes. Verses 23-26 focus particularly upon the rise of false christs and false prophets who will perform great deceptive signs and wonders, claiming that Christ has already come. Jesus then makes clear how to discern the counterfeit – His coming (*parousia*) will not be in secret, as the false christs/prophets will claim, but will be universally visible, “as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west” (vs. 28).

Verse 29 then moves to specific end-time signs. Jesus returns to the subject of the great tribulation of “those days” (with the demonstrative adjective again after its noun as in vs. 22) mentioned in vss. 20-21. Already in vs. 21 He had intimated that the tribulation would be cut short for the sake of the elect. Now in vs. 29 He makes even clearer that the actual tribulation is included in, but not totally coterminous with the “those days” (i.e., the 1260 years of papal supremacy): “Immediately after the tribulation of those days [*tōn hēmerōn ekeinōn*] the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light...” Mark’s version of Jesus’ words makes the distinction between the “those days” and the “tribulation” even more apparent: “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Mark 13:24). According to this description, at least the first of the signs – the darkening of the sun and moon – would come “in those days,” i.e., sometime before AD 1798, but after the tribulation or persecution had ceased. History records that the papal persecution of this long period had well-nigh ceased by about AD 1750, and thus the Great Dark Day of May 19, 1780 fits nicely within the parameters of Jesus’ prediction. Other signs follow: “The stars will fall

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from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." We have already referred to the great Leonid meteor shower of November 13, 1833, coming just as the first angel's message of Revelation 14 proclaims to the world the approaching antitypical Day of Atonement, the investigative judgment, starting in 1844.

According to Adventist eschatology, Christ could have come a few short years after 1844, if His people had responded to the Three Angels' Messages and given this message to the world. Thus the next great event on the apocalyptic calendar is the Second Coming of Christ. Verses 30-31 describe the long-awaited Parousia:

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear [*phanēsetai*] in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming [*erchomenon*] on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

That brings us to the end of the second literary section of the chapter, devoted to the events after the destruction of Jerusalem leading up to, and including, the Second Advent of Christ.

The key terms and their referents in this section are summarized in the following chart:

B. Verses 21-31: Events Up To, And Including The Second Advent	
Reference	Significant Terms And Explanation
Vs. 21	"A great tribulation" (not "The great tribulation" of Rev 7:14)
Vs. 22	<i>hai hēmerai ekeinai</i> "those days" (demonstrative adjective <i>after</i> its noun) of tribulation; see parallel in Luke 21:24b and Rev 11:2 (next rows below)
Luke 21:24b	<i>patoumenē</i> "trampled" = Dan 8:10 (LXX) = persecution of saints by little horn
Luke 21:24b	<i>kairoi</i> "times" = Dan 7:25 (LXX) = 3½ "times" or 1260 days/years (AD 538-1798) of persecution
Rev 11:2	Gentiles (little horn), tread underfoot (trample), holy city (Jerusalem), 42 months (3½ times): synthesis of Dan 7:25; Dan 8:10, 13; and Luke 21:24b
Vs. 29	<i>tōn hēmerōn ekeinōn</i> "those days" (after the tribulation but within the parameters of "those days;" cf. Mk 13:24 = Dark Day of May 19, 1780)
Vs. 30	<i>phanēsetai</i> "appear" = Parousia or Second Advent of Christ
Vs. 30	<i>erchomenon</i> "coming" of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven = Parousia

### A'. Verses 32-35: The Parable Of The Fig Tree

Now we are ready for the payoff of our study. Jesus tells His disciples a parable of a fig tree: "When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things [*tauta*], know that it is near, at the very doors" (vss. 32-33). Note the appearance of the term *tauta* "these things," which we have not seen since the first section (vs. 8). To what does *tauta* "these things" refer? Recall that in the pattern set already at the outset of the chapter (vss. 2-3), and followed consistently in the first section (vss. 4-20), *tauta* "these things" referred to events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus we have a terminological indicator that in the parable of the fig tree, Jesus is

reverting to a discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem, and not (at least in its primary application) continuing His discussion of the Parousia.

Now we are ready to look again at the *crux interpretum* passage, vs. 34: "Assuredly, I say to you, this [*autē*] generation will by no means pass away till all these things [*tauta*] are fulfilled." To what does the *tauta* "these things" refer? Consistent with usage elsewhere in the chapter, it refers to the events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem, and not (in its primary application) to the Parousia.<sup>16</sup> This is further established by the use of the term *autē* "this" in the phrase "this generation." As we have seen earlier, the word *houtos* (feminine *autē*) "this," like *tauta* "these," is also a terminological indicator in the first section of Matthew 24 for events nearer to Jesus' own time on earth, events leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem. Still further confirmation that vs. 34 is referring (in its primary application) to the generation of the first century AD and not the generation at the end of the world, comes from analysis of the whole phrase *hē genea autē* "this generation." A look at usage of this phrase elsewhere in Matthew's gospel reveals that invariably it denotes Jesus' contemporary generation (see Matt 1:17; 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 23:36).<sup>17</sup>

Finally, if one looks at Matthew 24:34 in the larger context of Jesus' woes upon the scribes and Pharisees in the previous chapter,

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<sup>16</sup>Without analyzing the whole structural flow that has been outlined in this study, nonetheless Keener, 589, rightly recognizes the pattern of the usage of the phrase "these things" in this chapter and its reference to the destruction of Jerusalem: "'these things' in Matthew 24 (cf. 24:2) apply to the desolation of the temple to occur within that generation (24:34)."

<sup>17</sup>This is the majority view among Matthew commentators. I concur with the assessment of Larry Chouinard: "Efforts to understand the term 'generation' (*genea*) as anything other than Jesus' contemporaries (e.g., people in general, humanity, or a generation living in the end-time) is artificial and appears to be based upon suppositions brought to the text;" (*Matthew*, The College Press NIV Commentary [Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997], 431.)

there is a close parallel to the very wording of Jesus' prediction. In Matthew 23, the context is clearly the condemnation upon the Jewish leaders for rejecting Jesus, with the pronouncement of doom upon national Israel as a socio-political entity: "See, your house is left to you desolate" (vs. 36). In the previous verse comes the parallel with our *crux* passage: "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things [*tauta*] will come upon this generation [*epi tēn genean tautēn*]" (vs. 35).

If one takes the phrase "this generation" to refer to Jesus' contemporary generation, alive as He was speaking to them approximately AD 30, and if one assumes the length of a generation in biblical thought (or at least Jesus' thought here) to be about 40 years,<sup>18</sup> then the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) takes place exactly on time just before Jesus' generation passes away (AD 30 + 40 years = AD 70).<sup>19</sup> In summary, then, Matthew 24:34 states that "this generation" (i.e., Jesus' contemporary generation, assuming approximately 40 years) would not pass away until all "these things" (i.e., events leading up to, and including, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70) would be fulfilled. This passage, in its primary contextual application, does not

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<sup>18</sup>See, e.g., the wilderness generation at the time of the Exodus that passed off the scene in forty years (Num 14:29-34; 32:11-12; Deut 1:34-35). It seems likely that Jesus borrowed the phrase "this evil generation" (Matt 12:45) from its usage in Deuteronomy 1:35, where it refers to the generation that passed away in 40 years. Keener, 589, points out (with documentation) how forty years was one estimate among early Jewish sources (including Qumran and the Talmud) for the duration of the messianic woes.

<sup>19</sup>To be more precise, according to the chronology adopted in standard Adventist interpretation of the life of Christ, Jesus gave this prediction in AD 31, and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 would fall well within the forty years of Jesus' contemporary generation. Cf. Keener's observation: "Because Jesus' warning must precede AD 70...it is interesting that Jerusalem fell about forty years after Jesus' warning;" (589). Likewise, Bruner, 876, writes: Exactly a generation after Jesus' words (spoken about AD 30), Jerusalem *was* destroyed and its temple razed (in AD 70). So Jesus' prophecy came true insofar as his sermon answered the disciples' *first* question about the end of the temple, 'When will these things happen [to the temple]?' (v 3). Answer: 'the temple will end with this generation' (v 34);" (italics original).



refer to the Parousia. Thus this prophecy was fulfilled (in the first century AD) and not failed (in the end-time before the Parousia)!

Verse 35 seems to be a transitional verse: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." In other words, even if heaven and earth should pass away, Christ's words are sure and will be fulfilled as predicted. This seems to be particularly addressed to the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, which He has just mentioned, but could also have application to His promise of the Parousia.

The key terms and their referents in this section are summarized in the following chart:

A'. Verses 32-35: The Parable Of The Fig Tree	
Reference	Significant Terms And Explanation
Vs. 33	<i>tauta</i> "these things" (cf. the pattern set in vss. 2-3) = Destruction of Jerusalem
Vs. 34	<i>tauta</i> "these things" = Destruction of Jerusalem!
Vs. 34	<i>hē genea autē</i> "this generation" = Jesus' contemporary generation (cf. 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 23:36); in biblical terms, about 40 years (Num 14:29-34; 32:11-12; Deut 1:34-35; Matt 12:45)
Vs. 34 (synthesis)	"This generation [of Jesus' day = about 40 years] shall not pass [AD 30 + 40 years = AD 70] till all these things [the destruction of Jerusalem] shall be fulfilled [= destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70]." The prophecy was fulfilled; it did not fail! Jesus' words were unfailing (vs. 35).

#### B'. Verses 36-44: No One Knows The Time Of The Parousia

Verse 36 shifts abruptly away from language of "this" and "these" to "that": "But of that [*ekeinēs*] day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." Earlier we noted that language of "those/that" in Matthew 24 referred to the Second

Coming of Christ when the demonstrative adjective followed the noun (vss. 22 [2x], 29), and such is the case in this verse as well. The verses that follow make repeated reference to the “coming [*parousia*] of the Son of man” (vss. 37, 39; cf. vs. 42 and 44 with the synonym in verbal form *erchomai* “come”), following the pattern set in vs. 3, and giving a clear context of the Second Advent of Christ. Jesus indicates through various illustrations that humans do not know in advance the day/hour of the Parousia. “Therefore,” advises Jesus, “watch” (vs. 42) and “be ready” (vs. 44). Verses 45-51 conclude the chapter on a related theme, advising those waiting for the Parousia to be like the faithful and wise servant who continued to be faithful in the affairs of the master even though the master delayed his coming. These verses, and the further counsel of Jesus regarding the attitude of those waiting for the Parousia in the next chapter, lie outside the scope of this study.

Key terms and their referents in this section are summarized in the following chart:

<b>B'. Verses 36-44: No One Knows The Time Of The Parousia</b>	
<b>Reference</b>	<b>Significant Terms And Explanation</b>
Vs. 36	<i>ekeinēs</i> “that” (not “this”) day or hour = Parousia
Vss. 37, 39	<i>parousia</i> “coming” (Parousia); cf. vss. 42 and 44 <i>erchomai</i> “come” and the pattern in vs. 3

Gathering together the above sections, the structural flow of Matthew 24:4-44 may be outlined in the following chart:

<b>C. Summary Of The Structural Flow Of Matthew 24:4-44</b>	
A. Vss. 4-20	The Fall Of Jerusalem
B. Vss. 21-31	The Parousia
A'. Vss. 32-35	The Fall Of Jerusalem
B'. Vss. 36-44	The Parousia

The movement of Matthew 24:4-44 thus follows the basic apocalyptic pattern of the visions in Daniel, moving in a historical sequence line from the time of Jesus to the end of the age (vss. 4-31), and then repeating the basic sequence in the further explanation and application of the sequence (vss. 32-44).<sup>20</sup>

### The Fall Of Jerusalem As A Type Of The End Of The Age

While the structural flow of Matthew 24 moves in a linear dimension, briefly outlining history from the First Advent till the end of the age, this is not the last word on interpretation of the chapter. The literary structure and content of the chapter also seem to indicate a typological relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age. The close linkage between these two events is already apparent in vss. 2-3, where the two questions of the disciples were probably intended by them to refer to the same event, and Jesus does not directly correct their misunderstanding. But Jesus also seems to relate the two events in a type-antitype relationship by repeating virtually the same list of signs and synonymous terms for both events. Note these parallels:

The Fall Of Jerusalem As A Type Of The End Of The Age	
The Fall Of Jerusalem	The End Of The Age
tribulation (vs. 9)	great tribulation (vs. 21)
false christs (vs. 5)	false christs (vs. 24)
false prophets (vs. 11)	false prophets (vs. 24)
"end" ( <i>telos</i> , vss. 6, 13, 14)	"end" ( <i>synteleia</i> , vs. 3)

<sup>20</sup>See Ellen White's assessment to this effect: "Christ presented before them [the disciples] an outline of the prominent events to take place before the close of time;" Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1939), 25. See also White's commentary on the basic sequential flow of the chapter in *The Desire of Ages*, 627-636.

If the destruction of Jerusalem is a type of the end of the age, as these specific parallels and the overall juxtaposing of the two events within the chapter seem to indicate, then the whole flow of the preceding signs and the destruction of Jerusalem itself, can be seen to foreshadow the preceding signs and the end of the age.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for example, the (typical) promise in vs. 14 that when the gospel is preached to all the world the end [of Jerusalem] will come, can be applied in principle to the (antitypical) universal proclamation of the gospel before the end of the age (as in Rev 14:6).

<sup>21</sup>A number of interpreters recognize the typological connection between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age. So, e.g., Myron Augsburger: "The fall of Jerusalem was the type of the antitype, the harvest of God;" Myron S. Augsburger, *Matthew, The Communicator's Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 274. Cf. Bruner's assessment: "The two sets of events were not unrelated. The destruction of Jerusalem was *the prototype* of the end of the world;" (843, emphasis original). Hendricksen concurs: "There was indeed a connection between the judgment to be executed upon the Jewish nation and the final judgment on the day of the consummation of all things. As has already been indicated, the first was a type, a foreshadowing or adumbration, of the second;" (851).

Ellen White also recognizes this typological aspect of Matthew 24: "The prophecy which He uttered was twofold in its meaning: while foreshadowing the destruction of Jerusalem, it prefigured also the terrors of the last great day;" (White, *The Great Controversy*, 25). Again, "The Saviour's prophecy concerning the visitation of judgment upon Jerusalem is to have another fulfillment, of which that terrible desolation was but a faint shadow. In the fate of the chosen city we may behold the doom of a world that has rejected God's mercy and trampled upon His law;" (Ibid., 36). See also *The Desire of Ages*, 628: "Jesus did not answer His disciples by taking up separately the destruction of Jerusalem and the great day of His coming. He mingled the description of these two events. Had He opened to His disciples future events as He beheld them, they would have been unable to endure the sight. In mercy to them He blended the description of the two great crises, leaving the disciples to study the meaning for themselves. When He referred to the destruction of Jerusalem, His prophetic words reached beyond that event to the final conflagration in that day when the Lord shall rise out of His place to punish the world for their iniquity, when the earth shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain. This entire discourse was given, not for the disciples only, but for those who should live in the last scenes of earth's history."

Likewise, the parable of the fig tree in vss. 32-35, referring in its primary application to the destruction of Jerusalem, can be viewed as foreshadowing the end of the age. The (typical) message of the parable applies in principle to the (antitypical) Parousia: when the signs appear, one can know that the end is near. So in a secondary sense, one can see an end-time application of Matthew 24:34, upholding the imminence of the Parousia after the appearance of the signs, while recognizing that this is not the primary fulfillment.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

The key to the primary fulfillment of Matthew 24 is found in the introductory verses 2-3, where the terminological pattern is set forth: *tauta* "these things" refers to events related to the destruction of Jerusalem, and *syntelesia* "end" and *parousia* "coming" refer to the Second Advent of Christ.

Based upon this introductory pattern, the chapter flows in an ABA'B' structure:

- A - vss. 4-20 The Destruction Of Jerusalem
- B - vss. 21-31 The Parousia
- A' - vss. 32-35 The Destruction Of Jerusalem
- B' - vss. 36-44 The Parousia

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<sup>22</sup>So Augsburg, 274: "In verse 34 we have the phrase, 'this generation shall not pass' (KJV) until all is fulfilled. This had primary reference to the disciples and to the immediate events before them. The fall of Jerusalem was the type of the antitype, the harvest of God." Ellen White applies Matthew 24:34 in principle to the last days: "Christ has given signs of His coming. He declares that we may know when He is near, even at the doors. He says of those who see these signs, 'This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.' These signs have appeared. Now we know of a surety that the Lord's coming is at hand. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away,' He says, 'but My words shall not pass away,'" White, *The Desire of Ages*, 632.

Our crux passage, Matthew 24:34, comes in the section describing the destruction of Jerusalem, and reached its fulfillment in AD 70. The prophecy, “This generation shall not pass...,” was indeed fulfilled, and has not failed.

At the same time, the description of the destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24 is presented in the chapter as a type of the end of the age, so that in principle, Matthew 24:34 applies to the last days, in teaching that with the fulfillment of the end-time signs the coming of the Son of Man is indeed near.

Of course, the main purpose of Matthew 24, summarized in vss. 42-51, as well as the chapter that follows, is not to present a prophetic outline of future events, but to call upon God’s people to “watch” – keep awake, be on the alert, at all times, and so to be ready when He does come.

